Virginie Greene’s *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* is a modern French translation of the documents of the 1401-1405 debate surrounding Guillaume Lorris and Jean de Meun’s thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose* [*The Rose*]. Greene’s book brings the modern reader the first written debate about this controversial medieval classic. This edition includes letters to and from the supporters of Jean de Meun: Jean de Montreuil, Pierre Col, and Gontier Col; and his opponents: Jean Gerson and Christine de Pizan. Their debate centered on the literary status of *The Rose*, particularly the continuations by Jean de Meun, and the aptitude of women (or a woman, Pizan) to debate such a subject.

Greene’s introduction is somewhat of an homage to Eric Hicks upon whose 1977 edition of the same documents she bases her translation. She corresponded with him prior to his passing and received his approval for this project. Greene’s purpose is to provide an edition that is accessible to twenty-first-century scholars and students who may not be specialists in the subject matter or Old French. Hicks’ edition was primarily intended for specialists, and Greene and others have found it difficult to use in the classroom due to the latinisms and obscurities of the Old French. Greene has expanded Hicks’ notes and added her own to provide the beginning scholar with information to pursue further study. She has also included information on work undertaken since 1977. As Greene intended, the presentation of textual difficulties, variants, and references is easily accessible to the non-specialist.

Greene’s introduction is quite conversational, perhaps by design. She begins by defining the difference between a debate and a conversation. She places Hicks squarely amongst those who love to converse rather than debate and argues that Hicks refused to enter into the debate. Greene finds this quality of Hicks’ writing to be admirable and uses it to contrast the tenor of discussions, both medieval and modern, surrounding *The Rose*. She draws parallels between the medieval
debate, modern scholarly criticism, and modern debates in general.

Greene contends in the introduction that while *The Rose* is not a dialogic text, Jean de Meun’s relationship to Lorris as continuator opens up the door for ensuing debates. This divisive text, as Douglas Kelly calls it, engendered a virtual debate, which is witnessed in the glosses and textual variants of the manuscripts that contain it. This virtual debate turned into a real, epistolary debate when Pizan and Gerson criticized *The Rose* for its immorality and misogyny.

No one won this debate but it had a significant impact on at least one of the participants. Pizan’s involvement helped to establish her as a respected writer. Greene includes excerpts from Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* to demonstrate how Pizan’s earlier arguments against misogyny have been more fully developed in her most well-known work. Thus, this debate was an important step for Pizan’s thought. Greene calls for more work to be done on Gerson and Montreuil to determine what impact the debate may have had on their careers.

Within her introduction, Greene locates three moments in the modern criticism of the debate. The first moment came in the nineteenth century when scholars argued that the Col Brothers and Montreuil were early secular humanists. The second moment was in the 1960s when some scholars argued, rather, that Gerson was an early Christian humanist. The first two moments virtually ignored Pizan as some scholars relegated her to the status of minor poet. Now, in the third moment, scholars focus on questions of feminism and misogyny.

Greene groups the writings of the debate into four sections, each of which has its own introduction. The first group of letters contains the preliminary exchanges. The introduction to this section is somewhat confusing. It lacks a description of the manuscript tradition, although it implies that these letters were grouped together by Pizan to present her side of the debate. Clearly identifying and describing the manuscript(s) would ground this section in the material reality of the production of these letters. The other sections of the book include references to specific manuscripts, making the lack in this section more apparent. The reader must assume that referring to Hicks’ edition would provide the necessary sources.

In these preliminary letters, the modern reader learns the stakes
of the debate: 1) that Pizan’s arguments are not just directed at the misogyny but also at the immorality of the text, and 2) that Montreuil and the Col Brothers’ arguments center more on attacking Pizan’s and Gerson’s mastery of the text than trying to refute their arguments. Greene argues in her introduction that in order for Pizan and Gerson to debate the supporters of Jean de Meun, they must, at the least, acknowledge the importance, if not the value, of *The Rose* as a literary work and that all participants must and do have a mutual respect for each other. This aspect of the debate becomes clear in this first grouping of letters. Greene contrasts this medieval style of debate with the modern notion of debate as witnessed in her odd and out-of-place example of the film *Roger and Me* in which no one could imagine Michael Moore, the film maker, and Roger Smith, the CEO of General Motors, engaging in a meaningful exchange of ideas. In their letters, Montreuil and the Col Brothers reveal a certain respect for Pizan. They enter into debate with her with a certain pleasure mixed with annoyance and worry. They are not blatant misogynists, and they argue that Jean de Meun is not either.

Greene next presents Hicks’ modern French translations of eight Latin letters by Montreuil with expanded notes. For example, in a note in which Hicks provides the source of a quote as the *Carmina* of Claudianus, Greene further informs the reader of the dates and identity of this Latin author. Montreuil’s letters are addressed to a variety of church officials and reveal something of the club-like atmosphere surrounding supporters of Jean de Meun. Montreuil entreats his recipients to support the cause of the great master.

The third section of the book comes from a fascinating manuscript produced for a supporter of Jean de Meun. It is a grouping of letters and writings of Pizan, Gerson, and Pierre Col included with the complete text of *The Rose*. This section provides an amazing opportunity to see how Pizan was viewed by her contemporaries. Greene includes notes that compare Pizan’s letters from this manuscript with her other letters to demonstrate how the scribe of this manuscript changed and intentionally weakened her arguments. The variants of Pizan’s letters are not the result of miscopying but are a deliberate attempt to discredit her.

The final section of the book comprises auxiliary pieces by Pizan and Gerson. In addition to the excerpts from *The Book of the City*
of Ladies, Greene includes Pizan’s poems related to the debate. She also includes one of Gerson’s sermons in which he demonstrates his ability to write a sophisticated allegory in opposition to the themes of The Rose. Greene argues that Gerson is the most talented writer of the group.

The Romance of the Rose continues to overshadow this fascinating medieval debate about its merits. Greene’s edition will bring the debate to a wider, French-speaking audience and will open up continued scholarly work. In December 2006, Routledge published Debating the Roman de la Rose, edited by Christine McWebb. This critical anthology with translations into English contains many of the same letters and documents as Greene’s edition. The appearance of these two books in the same year speaks to the importance of this early example of literary criticism.

Elizabeth A. Hubble  
University of Montana


The ritual of churcing, the liturgical ceremony which concluded the “lying-in” month that followed the birth of a child has, as Paula Rieder notes in the introduction to her book, received very little scholarly attention. On the Purification of Women is, therefore, an extremely welcome addition to studies on the history of lay women’s lives in the later Middle Ages. Although Rieder admits that her original idea, to examine the ritual in the early and high Middle Ages, was hampered by “thin or nonexistent” material (7), she has identified a rich collection of archival sources for twelfth- to fifteenth-century France, especially for Normandy where the custom of churcing was particularly popular. The study thus offers a “full picture of the liturgical and social celebrations of churching in France [. . .] in the fifteenth century” (7), directly complementing the more abundant studies of the post-Reformation rite.

Previous analyses of churching have focused either on the